

SOME IMPRESSIONS OF JAPAN

BY

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LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

To undertake to describe the life of a people without knowing their language is impertinent, and I think it only right to warn you that to-night you are going to listen to such impertinence.

If in the course of the evening you feel that you have been tricked into allowing a blind man to be your guide along paths too tortuous even for a man in full possession of his eyesight, hold me not responsible for the crime, but visit the guilt of it on your enthusiastic President, Mr. Syed Ali Akbar, to whose insistent demand that I should lecture to your Association on Japan I had not the strength to say "No."

Circumstances, which I have not the time to detail to you to-night, have made Japan the inheritor and the guardian of two ancient and honoured traditions of Asia—the tradition of the Chinese Confucius and that of the Indian Buddha ; for in the evolution of the national soul of Japan the practicality of the teachings of Confucius has played as great a part as the noble idealism of the religion of Gautama Buddha.

The combination of these two influences with the simplicity inherent in Shintoism—the indigenous religion of Japan—has resulted in a culture remarkable for the great impetus that it has given to Art, whereby Japan has become the producer of those dainty and beautiful objects for which she is so deservedly famous to-day.

The land of Buddha, alas ! knows Buddhism no longer, and China has not yet recovered from the deadening effects of the Manchu invasion which strangled most of her creative impulses and damaged the foundations of her national life.

Thus Japan is the only country left to us where all, that was once great in the ancient civilization of China, and all, that was noble in the Buddhism of India as a living religion, can still be studied.

The victory of Japan in her conflict with Russia therefore assumes a great cultural importance ; for, had Japan been crushed in that war, in her ruins would have perished two of the most glorious survivals of ancient Asia.

Personally, I am deeply interested in Japan not only because she is the most progressive country in Asia, but also because she is the only country where the West has met the East in that spirit of friendly equality from which nothing but good can result to the world.

As the possible source therefore of a new culture, the evolution of Japan should be watched by us Indians with great attention and, as I believe that the time has come when the East should interpret the East to the East, I shall endeavour to convey to you to-night, as briefly as I can, some of my impressions of that country.

One of the very first things that an Indian visitor notices on his arrival in Japan is the remarkable homogeneity of the people, physical as well as cultural. So great has their oneness become that, for a foreigner, ignorant of the language of the land, it is almost impossible to locate the social position of the persons with whom he comes into contact in the course of his travels in different parts of the country.

Politeness, refinement of gesture and neatness in dress, which in most countries tend to become the monopoly of the so-called higher classes, are universal in Japan. During the whole of my stay in that country, which covered a period of almost nine months, I never once saw any one quarrelling in the streets, nor did I once hear even the ordinary workmen speaking to each other in that loud voice which denotes anger and which is, alas ! only too common in our own land.

In this self-control, I am convinced, is to be found one of the secrets of the wonderfully rapid progress that Japan has made during the

last sixty years. The power of exercising self-control can only be developed through discipline, and discipline the Japanese nation possesses to a marvellous extent.

Another characteristic of the Japanese people—a characteristic that has made them unique in the world of to-day—is their deep appreciation of all that is beautiful in nature. I do not think that there is any country in the world where beautiful landscapes, beautiful mountains, beautiful trees and flowers, and even beautiful stones are so admired as they are in Japan; and this appreciation, be it remembered, of the beauties with which nature has so richly endowed the country is shared by all, by the rich and the poor, the young and the old.

If I were asked to analyse the inner life of the Japanese people to-day, I would hazard the statement that the doctrines of Confucius form the basis of the social structure of the nation, Buddhism inspires the best art of the country, while Shintoism guides the daily life both of the Living and of the Dead. Let not the phrase “Life of the Dead” surprise you. Do not, I pray you, read into it any desire of mine to be paradoxical. All that I intend to convey to you by it is that according to the national belief of Japan the dead never die in the same way in which they die in other countries, for their spirits remain present in the land and, though unseen, have to be

served and honoured as living people have to be served and honoured.

Shintoism, as has already been stated, is the oldest religion of Japan and therefore also the state religion. Though it is based on ancestor-worship, its followers pray not only to the spirits of those ancient Gods who are believed to have been the progenitors of the Japanese race, but also to the spirits of a large and ever-increasing number of deified heroes and illustrious men who, while in the visible world, conferred great benefits on their mother-land.

The most interesting feature of Shintoism, however, is to be found in the fact that, though it offers neither a set of dogmas nor any sacred books to its votaries, it nevertheless possesses all the vitality of a great positive religion and, to quote Lafcadio Hearn—that great authority on Japan—“signifies character in the higher sense—courage, courtesy, honour, and above all things, loyalty. The spirit of Shinto is the spirit of filial piety, the zest of duty, the readiness to surrender life for a principle without a thought of wherefore. * * * *

It is conservatism likewise; the wholesome check upon the national tendency to cast away the worth of the entire past in rash eagerness to assimilate too much of the foreign present. It is religion,—but religion transformed into hereditary moral impulse,—religion transmuted into ethical instinct. It

is the whole emotional life of the race,—the Soul of Japan.”

And Hirata, a great Japanese expounder of Shintoism, sheds still further light on the subject and explains the spiritual self-culture of the Shintoists thus: “If you desire to practise virtue, learn to stand in awe of the Unseen; and that will prevent you from doing wrong. Make a vow to the Gods who rule over the Unseen, and cultivate the conscience implanted in you; and then you will never wander from the way. Devotion to the memory of ancestors is the mainspring of all virtues. No one who discharges his duty to them will ever be disrespectful to the Gods or to his living parents. Such a man will be faithful to his prince, loyal to his friends, and kind and gentle with his wife and children.”

This practice of ancestor-worship and the belief that the Dead are not separated from the Living have created certain remarkable traits in the Japanese character. To them are ultimately traceable not only the ardent loyalty of the Japanese to their Emperor, but also that fearlessness of death and that great love of their mother-land which have enabled them to set at naught all the attempts made by foreign nations to subdue them. In their Emperor the Japanese see personified all the glories of their ancient race and all the virtues of their ancestors, and this feeling of deep

reverence is enhanced by the fact that ever since the dawn of their history the present dynasty has reigned in the land.

Thus the family of the Emperor of Japan is the oldest reigning family in the world, and the Japanese are intensely proud of it. Indeed, when we study the annals of other Oriental countries and therein read the accounts of their frequent subjugation by foreign invaders, and also realize how comparatively brief have been the reigns of royal dynasties, the history of Japan, representing as it does the unbroken tradition of one Royal Family, inspires in us feelings of the deepest veneration and awe.

This proud privilege of having shared all the joys and sorrows of their subjects from time immemorial has gained for the Imperial Family of Japan that impassioned loyalty which, certainly in our own day, remains unparalleled. To the Japanese disloyalty to their Emperor would be disloyalty not only to themselves but also to that vast multitude of the spirits of their ancestors, who are ever present in the land and who continue to guide the destinies of the nation.

It is in this feeling of profound devotion to the Emperor that the explanation should be sought of those deeds of self-sacrifice, which so frequently occur in Japan and which almost always puzzle foreigners.

Last year while I was in the country one such incident took place, and I shall narrate it to you hoping that, after what I have been telling you to-night, you at least will not find it difficult to understand its full significance.

The Silver Wedding of the Emperor (that is to say the completion of twenty-five years of married life) was to be celebrated by the nation, and the Emperor, in honour of this happy event, had donated, as a personal gift, a large sum of money which he desired should be distributed amongst those of his subjects who had reached a certain age. Consequently orders were issued to all the Mayors of cities and Headmen of villages to register the names of all the persons possessing the qualifications laid down by the Emperor. After this list had been compiled and submitted to the authorities, a certain villager discovered that he had miscalculated his age by one year. Feeling that he had been guilty of supplying incorrect information to his Emperor, he committed suicide, leaving behind him a written explanation of the motives that had led him to lay down his life in expiation of the mistake made by him.

This incident, while it filled all us foreigners in Japan with amazement, was treated by my Japanese friends as an ordinary episode. It was felt by them that the villager had done nothing more than most other Japanese would have done under similar circumstances.

There also comes back to my mind the suicide of a station-master in an important city in Japan who, owing to a slight error in drawing up the special time-table, caused the Imperial train to be delayed by a few minutes.

But the most famous instance of this kind of self-sacrifice in recent times is that offered by the suicide of General Nogi—the hero of the Russo-Japanese War.

When the news was brought to him of the death of the Emperor Meiji—the father of the present Emperor of Japan—he and his wife bade farewell to their friends and relations and, sitting down calmly and with smiles on their faces, put an end to their lives.

In the letter that the General left for the nation, which is literally a message from the other world, he warned his countrymen against the habits of luxury which foreign civilization was introducing in the land, and which, he felt, would corrupt that Spartan life of the Japanese which was the glory of their race and on which alone depended their future safety. He also stated that having served the Emperor all his life in this world he desired to serve him also in the next.

The sensation which the news of this suicide caused throughout the world, for the name of the man who broke the Russian armies was known in all countries, can be easily imagined. The Japanese nation showed its appreciation

of the high idealism that underlay the act, and to-day there is a shrine in Tokyo dedicated to the spirit of General Nogi. I visited it last year, and as I stood in silence before it thinking of him whose memory it perpetuates, some children dressed in multi-coloured Kimonos trooped in, and, after making a deep obeisance before the shrine, began to play on its steps. But the voices of the children disturbed not the spirit of the Dead One. The rays of the setting sun lit up the little temple, and I turned homeward saying to myself: "Verily in this land of Japan the Dead always remain with the Living."

But I have talked to you enough of the spirits of dead ancestors, of mortuary shrines and of suicides, and I shall now change the subject lest you charge me with being unnecessarily lugubrious.

I have already told you that the appreciation of the beauties of nature is universal in Japan. But real appreciation implies understanding, and in understanding the varying moods of nature—the grave as well as the gay—the Japanese are unrivalled.

There are in Japan restaurants famous for the views one can see on rainy days, others where one goes to enjoy the reflection of the full moon on the water, and, when you invite friends, failure in choosing the right restaurant is looked upon as the sign of an uncultured

and therefore of an ugly mind. In the same way, plants and flowers are to the Japanese living creatures—almost human in the amount of care they require. The lady, who fills her vase with flowers, devotes as much attention to their arrangement and handles them as tenderly as she would her own baby. To her they are companions whose presence in the room is enough to dispel the ennui apt to be caused by solitude.

On the day of the fall of the first snow, all the banks and shops are closed, and people in thousands climb hills and select other spots from where to admire the changed scenery.

In February, when the plum-trees blossom beneath the snow, men, women and children flock in crowds to view the sight, and poems are composed to mark the nation's delight at the event; and later on in April, when cherry-trees flower, hundreds of special trains are run and long journeys undertaken to places noted for them.

This enthusiasm for nature is found even amongst coolies and labourers. The rickshaw man dragging you uphill in a snow storm will not complain to you of being exhausted, but will draw your attention to the delicate effect of snow on the pine forest around you.

This cult of nature has made the Japanese a nation of artists, with the result that there

is no country to-day where so many beautiful articles of different kinds are produced as in Japan. Even the ordinary utensils, in everyday use in Japanese households, possess the high finish and beauty of form of veritable objects of art, and bear witness to the instinctive desire of the nation to beautify life.

That this love of beauty should persist in Japan, in spite of the economic struggle that has been forced on her ever since she was compelled to open her doors to foreigners in 1854, is proof of the fact that it is a sentiment deeply rooted in the national soul.

But it did not take Japan long, once she found herself face to face with the Western world, to realize that, if her independence was to be preserved intact, it was necessary for her to do something more than manufacture beautiful articles and compose delicate poems.

The fate that had overtaken China and other Oriental countries appalled her, and she concentrated all her attention on the attempt to understand the secrets of the aggressive strength of Europe.

The so-called modernization of Japan therefore represents a measure of self-defence. The amount of energy that the nation has spent on the endeavour to comprehend the vital forces of European civilization has been colossal, and the use she has made of them truly wonderful.

Within the last fifty years from a nation, patronizingly smiled at for her quaintness, she has risen to the position of one of the four Great Powers of the day. Her opinion is now sought in all matters of political importance, and her views are treated with the respect due to the views of a great nation.

But the Japanese know that it is their success in the wars with China, Russia and lastly Germany, that has gained for them this admiration. Mr. Motono, who was the Japanese Minister in Paris, once expressed this very clearly when he reproachfully said to a French audience :—" As long as we consecrated ourselves to the work of intensive civilization, as long as we produced only men of letters, men of knowledge and artists, you treated us as barbarians. Now that we have learned to kill, you call us civilized."

Now the steps taken by Japan to adopt the most useful features of European civilization are interesting. She sent her ablest men abroad with instructions to make a careful study of the conditions prevailing in the different countries visited by them. They were to discover the sources of the special strength of each country, and devise methods by which similar results could be obtained in their own land.

Thus, from the very beginning of her intercourse with the foreign world, Japan took

care not to allow herself to come under the influence of any one country. She went to Europe and America as one goes to a shop, and brought back with her only that which she felt was needed by her. In other words she "skimmed the cream from the milk, irrespective of the breed to which the cow belonged."

The result of this eclecticism has been that the Japanese, instead of themselves becoming westernised, have Japanised the most useful products of Western civilization. There is as much of France in Japan as of England, and as much of America as of Germany. Unlike us in India, they have not concentrated their attention on any one country, but have subjected the whole of the Western world to a searching examination—almost microscopic in its character—in the attempt to make a minute study of it.

They have felt that in matters pertaining to Art and Philosophy, that is to say, in matters that affect the human soul most intimately, they have nothing to learn from the West, and that their social customs and national beliefs are as refined and as logical as those of Europe. The inner life of the nation, therefore, has continued its course, uninfluenced by that which has been imported from foreign countries.

This fact becomes most apparent when you enter the house of a Japanese, for, unless he

be a man whose duties make it necessary for him to entertain foreigners frequently, you will not see even a single chair or sofa in any room, but will be given, instead, a silken cushion on which to sit down. Nor will you find in his house those third-rate products of European art, which so frequently defile the walls even of some of our very best palaces in India.

Thus two Japans have grown up side by side—the Japan that revels in the beauty of cherry blossoms, and the Japan that is busy putting up modern factories to enable her to take part in the race for wealth, in which she is the only Asiatic competitor. But since it is the latter that makes the existence of the former possible, much of the ugliness that one encounters in the industrial towns of Japan should be forgiven her.

The creation of large factories, on European and American models, and the organization of capital and labour, which it entails, are making their effects felt in the industrial districts. The Japanese working-men are becoming as dissatisfied with their lives, as those of Europe, and it remains to be seen what solution Japan will offer for this great problem of the now almost universal conflict between Capital and Labour.

Personally, I am inclined to believe that the great patriotism of the people and the national tradition of loyalty to the employer will con

tinue to act as healthy checks, and Japan will be spared those extravagant outbreaks of bitter passion which, for the last few years, have figured so conspicuously in the newspapers of most countries.

But more serious than any possible disaffection of her working-men is the danger with which Japan is threatened by the morality, or rather by the want of morality, of her petty merchants. These, never very honest, have become more demoralized by the ease with which they were able to make large profits during the Great War, when most other countries were busy fighting Germany. As one who was a frequent victim of their rapacity, I entertain feelings of particular bitterness towards them. They are the dirtiest blot on the national life, and the harm, which their greed is doing to Japan in foreign countries, unless soon checked, will become irreparable.

That the ethics of the merchants of Japan should be so different from those of the rest of the nation is to be accounted for by the fact that, till the advent in the land of foreign notions of life, commerce was looked down upon by the nation as the meanest way of earning a livelihood. The merchant always ranked last in the social scale, and even to-day, in spite of her changed life, the social position that Japan accords to her commercial magnates is very low, when compared with the position

they occupy in society in Europe and America.

The best representatives of the nation are to be found in the Army and the Navy and also in the Administrative Departments of the Government. Thus to expect honesty from a petty merchant of Japan is like expecting to find the intellectual refinement of a Brahmin in a Pariah in India.

Fortunately for her, however, the rulers of Japan have now fully realized the harm that is being done to the country by the deceitful methods of these merchants, and steps are being taken to minimise the evil by bringing her export trade under some kind of official control.

But there are two other dangers that threaten Japan at the present moment. The first arises from the disorders that have become almost chronic in China, and the second from the intensely anti-Asiatic attitude which America has adopted and which led her, only two years ago, to enact laws forbidding the entry of Asiatic immigrants in her territory. The Japanese nation has rightly felt this as a great insult, and I am sure that, unless the evil is soon remedied, there is every possibility of as great a war breaking out in Asia as the one from the effects of which Europe still continues to suffer.

That America, who was the first to force an unwilling Japan to open her long-closed

doors to the Western world, should now herself forbid the entry of Japanese subjects by pleading economic necessity, is one of those ironical events which deserve being carefully studied by all Asiatic countries.

While the rest of the world is clamouring for peace and is busy doing its best to remove all risks of another world-wide conflagration, America seems to be bent on heaping such humiliation on the whole of Asia as can end only in bloodshed.

But this sudden change in the attitude of America has done one good thing. It has made the Japanese re-examine the foundations of their national life so as to remove from it all potential sources of future weakness.

It has also made them realize that their position as an Asiatic country is a lonely one; and this has led them to change their policy towards China whom they now desire to see firmly established as a strong and well-governed nation.

Should China succeed in the attempt she is making to organize her strength and resources, Asia will obtain that effective influence in world-politics which the future happiness of a large section of humanity so urgently demands.

Even while I am speaking to you, important events, all foreshadowing interesting developments, are taking place in that vast

country, and it is necessary that we Indians should follow them with great attention; for that will enable us to understand the painful stages through which a country, not possessing a homogeneous population, has to pass before it can achieve political unity.

That the near future will see Asiatic countries forming some kind of a defensive union is obvious, and Japan for one has already begun to make a serious endeavour to survey the whole East with that object in view. She has sent an ambassador to represent her in Turkey, and another will soon go to Persia, while an economic mission has only recently returned from a visit to Afghanistan.

Lest I lead you to think that the intentions of Japan are bellicose, it is necessary for me to inform you that the results of the recent German war and the sad plight both of the victors and the vanquished have convinced her of the futility of all wars of aggression. But she does believe in strengthening her own defences, and this she intends doing as thoroughly as she possibly can.

The world, therefore, should rest assured that it will only be when Japan feels that her very existence is threatened and that there is no other way by which she can safeguard it, that she will declare war. It is in the interest of all mankind to see that such a contingency does not arise,

Another very pressing problem that Japan has to solve is that of finding an outlet for her surplus population. The full seriousness of her difficulties in this connection will be understood by you when I tell you that, though her area is less than twice that of these Dominions, and her existing population about 65 millions, the annual increase in it reaches the huge figure of 700,000, and this in spite of the fact that no less than seven-eighths of the country is mountainous, where land cannot be brought under proper cultivation.

The refusal of America any longer to admit Japanese immigrants has made this problem most acute and, though Japan is busy exploring other countries for the purpose, so far no satisfactory solution has been found.

Japan, and with her the rest of Asia, has now seen that the principles of "Equal Opportunity" and "The Equality of Man," so fervidly preached by America, are nothing but political *mantras*, which even republics are ready to use to hypnotize weaker nations whose wealth they desire to extract.

The rapid rise of Japan to the position of a great power should not be looked upon as a miracle, for there is nothing supernatural about it. What she has done other countries too can do, provided they realize that no nation can ever achieve anything great whose

individuals are not prepared to do earnest work and practise towards each other that loyalty which alone forms the surest foundation of national strength.

For me, gentlemen, the Land of the Rising Sun is the Land of the Rising Hope of Asia. Midst its flower-studded valleys and emerald-green islands my soul expands, till the Past, the Present and the Future all become one. My spirit penetrates the veil of gloom that at present enwraps Asia, and I see a vision more majestic in its beauty than anything my mortal eye has yet seen—more majestic and beautiful than even the sacred Fujiyama in all the glory of a moonlit night.

Once in a forest in Japan, full of the memories of a by-gone age, there came floating to my ears the voices of the spirits of the Departed Great—voices that said, “O thou who art a welcome stranger in our land, possess thy soul in patience. The tortures thou art suffering are known to us, for we too have suffered them. Forget not that patience is the great heritage of the East, and that it is by patience and honest work alone that thy people can create that which they desire to create. It was Buddha, thy great countryman, who taught us this remedy against all worldly ills, and we to-day remind thee of it, for thy people seem to have most heedlessly forgotten it.”

The voices ceased, and with tears in my eyes I gazed westward where my country lay and where the sun was slowly setting in a haze of burnished gold.

FINIS

